

Short Story

Hold Me Tight

by L. Vocem

Content warning: This text contains references to sexual assault and violence.

A bus arrives at the strip mall parking lot. I check the number. It's not the one from Atlanta. They all look like Greyhound buses, but with different names in Spanish. I wait, rubbing my knee, still in pain — not perfect after five surgeries. I still limp. I've tried to correct it by overcompensating and bear the pain when I walk, but I limp nevertheless. At work, they call me *el Cojo*, the cripple. I owed that nickname not to the Central Americans or Mexicans, no, they're polite, but to my compatriots from the Caribbean, the cocky swaggering fellow Venezuelans. They will find something, whatever your weakness is, and turn it into your nickname. They call it endearing, but I disagree.

I don't know how I managed to convince Alejandra to come to Houston, at least to visit. I left Venezuela about a year and a half ago, scared shitless that I was going to lose my leg. *The Policia Nacional Bolivariana* surrounded and kicked me to the ground. I can still see the eyes of the son of a bitch pointing his gun to my face, then lowering the gun and shooting. My knee filled with pain. The cops got on their motorcycles and left. People in balconies around me screamed and recorded what happened. A pool of blood grew around my leg. I don't remember being lifted or anything after that. When I regained consciousness, I was in a private clinic. I asked where Alejandra was? No one in my family bothered to tell her until I insisted. I was heading to her apartment building when they shot me. I was going to tell her that I was sorry for calling her a coward, that yes, many people who demonstrated with us were leaving the country and if she wanted to leave, it was okay.

Another bus arrives. The numbers on the piece of paper match the ones on the bus. The door opens and people come out. I wait, catching my breath as each person descends the steps and moves to the luggage compartment under the bus.

She comes down. My heart skips. It's Alejandra — skinny Alejandra with her long black hair and olive complexion, no purple strand of hair, like she used to have. She squints and looks around the parking lot. I get out of the truck to face the Houston heat and wave at her. She carries a backpack. I can go to her, but then she may notice my limp. She moves slowly around so I decide to go greet her. As I walk, she looks up at me and smiles. I gaze at those deep brown eyes. I get close to her and like a magnet snapping into another magnet, we kiss. It's a deep kiss, filling me with memories of when we lived in Caracas. A kiss I have tried to recreate in my head for over a year. And here I am. Her face is radiant, exotic, the way I last remembered.

“Cómo estas?”

“Exhausted,” she says in Spanish, rolling her eyes and making a funny face.

“Are you ready for Houston?”

“Here I am.” She smiles.

“Do you have any luggage?”

“No, just my backpack.”

We get inside my truck, blast the air conditioner to reduce the intense heat. While driving, I ask her if she remembers the time we had at the beach. She laughs, asking me how's Juan Carlos, was Marcelo ever released? We share other memories, laugh and try to remember names of people who marched with us through the streets of Caracas. Where have those friends ended up by now?

We used to talk through Skype. But after she lost her job, ran out of food, and the little money she had was spent on her mother's insulin, something happened. I can't exactly tell. If I ask her right now, will she get evasive like she has done in the past?

I remember her telling me about her mom having appendicitis and needing surgery. Public hospitals were so bad down there that she had to sell their car to buy her own medicines, surgical instruments, painkillers. Then the blackout. I called and called Alejandra, she would

not answer. I called her brother's girlfriend, Yolanda, and asked her what was going on. Was Alejandra angry at me? She told me that Alejandra's mother's surgery was rough. The guards had stolen all her medicines and unless she paid them an exorbitant amount of money, her mother would die.

Alejandra deleted all her social media accounts and disappeared. One day I found out through a friend's post that she had left Caracas and moved to Atlanta. Still, I had no access to her. It took me almost eight months to finally get a cell number, and until this moment to see her again.

I park the truck in front of a little strip mall with about four establishments. The *amarillo, azul y rojo*, of the Venezuelan flag hanging on the front of the restaurant.

"My favorite Venezuelan restaurant," I say.

As we walk, I want to hold her hand, like we used to do when we strolled the streets of Caracas, but I feel awkward with my limp. The little swivel I have to avoid the pain. We reach the door. A wall of cold air hits us as I open the door of the restaurant away from the intense heat.

We speak to the waiter in Spanish, ask the usual questions of what part of the country he is from, what is the straw that broke the camel's back, and how long has he been here.

Alejandra orders a *reyna pepiada arepa* filled with a mix of avocado, mayo and chicken, while I order an *arepa de pabellon* filled with shredded beef, black beans, and fried plantains. The *arepas* arrive, steam coming out of them. We plunge in and take big bites, then look at each other. Alejandra closes her eyes, savoring, grinning.

"When was the last time you had something this good?"

"Well," she looks to the side, as though trying to recollect some distant memory. "Three weeks."

"What? No way."

"We have some really good *Areperas* in Atlanta."

“But anything this good?”

We arrive at my apartment. I introduce her to my two roommates, and take her to my room. She smiles, drops her backpack and asks if she could take a shower. Since I have the master bedroom, I have the private bathroom.

“Go ahead,” I say, closing the door behind her, going to the living room, where the roommates are watching a game between Real Madrid and Manchester United. On a big play the goalie jumps all the way to the side and catches the ball. The crowd cheers. The goalie gets up, bounces the ball several times and kicks it hard all the way to the midfield. My stomach tightens with a sense of jealousy. There was a time when I could play, maybe not as good but with intensity. I could run fast. I remember Alejandra and I running through the crowd in a demonstration with about a million people. We sneaked to the front, with the shield that Alejandra helped me build. We wore teargas masks made out of cut-out plastic two-liter Coke bottles. We ran to a group of demonstrators that had just been hit by the gas. I picked up a canister from the ground and threw it back at the *Guardia Nacional*, rubber bullets smacking us and the shield hard.

Alejandra comes out of the room looking like a dream. She stands in the hallway, the shadows accentuating her thin features, her long flowing hair damp and clinging to her skin in waves. I have imagined this moment, this instant ever since arriving in the United States. Every breath I took through traction, physical therapy, another surgery, was preparation for this. I imagined it just the way she looks right here, right now. The only thing missing is her purple strand of hair flowing through the front. She sits next to me and watches the game. I offer her a beer and ask if she wants to see our awesome view. We go outside to the balcony with a view across the parking lot of a huge wall blocking the sound from the highway.

“Nothing beats the view from your house of the Avila mountains with the little clouds hovering over the peak. I miss that.”

“And the blue *guacamayas* making a racket as they fly by.”

We sit on a couple of plastic chairs.

I mention our walks, holding hands along Sabana Grande Avenue, with the spacious sidewalks, street vendors, and cafes. How we sneaked to that car that had no engine or tires and used it as our hangout. She mentions the times when her mother was having her afternoon nap while some soap opera played on TV.

“Remember what we used to do?”

“Antonio, you were so loud. I had to tell you to be quiet.”

“Antonio, shh, you’re going to wake my mother,” I mimic her.

Alejandra imitates me imitating her and laughs. She sticks her tongue out at me and giggles.

“Do you think you’ll ever go back?” she asks.

“Maybe. I would like to. It seems so hopeless.”

“I remember when I first met you at Señor Mejias making the shields,” Alejandra says. “You were so handsome, so focused on the shield that I had to practically stand in front of you to be noticed.”

“It was Luis that suggested you gave me a hand. How stupid of me,” I say. “But after that, I could not take my eyes off you.”

I extend my hand. Alejandra embraces it. Her finger runs along my arm.

“Remember when we were both covered in purple bruises?” she says.

“Rubber bullets, the bastards. Got one right in my inner thigh.”

“I remember, I counted 27 on you,” Alejandra says.

“You were brave. You had about eleven and a black eye.”

My cell phone rings. I look at it, it’s work, so I have to respond.

“The crew,” I whisper. “The client wants to start tomorrow? They sat on the estimate for a whole month. How about materials? Oh, they have been delivered already. On their driveway.”

Shit, I want to take Alejandra out on the town, stay out late. Tomorrow, Sunday, show her around. But hell, I’m in construction, and unless it’s raining, we do the work when the work and crews are available. This pisses me off.

After going out to eat at a Vietnamese restaurant, we settle in my room. We touch and slowly remove shirts, pants, bra and kiss until we are in our underwear. Alejandra tracks the spots on my body where in the past, I have been hit by rubber bullets. She spots the scars that crisscross my knee, rubbing the little dots where they had performed the orthoscopic surgery. There was a time when her back was covered in swollen purple bruises as well. I trace the spots, now just clear skin. From behind I wrap my hand around her neck and kiss her.

Suddenly she freezes. Her arms fold.

She walks away and climbs inside the covers. I follow. I move my hand down her body to her panties when I sense some resistance from her. Her hand covers mine. It feels strange, perhaps I’m not reading the situation right. I continue to give her little kisses, yet her mood has changed. She slows down and doesn’t reciprocate as much.

I stop.

“It’s been a long trip... I’m exhausted,” Alejandra whispers.

She gives me a quick kiss on the lips, turns around and spoons against my body. I embrace her, enjoying the closeness, what I have been wishing for a whole year, even though I had dreamed of more.

I consider myself lucky. My family is not rich, but more upper-middle class Venezuelans. My dad works for a multinational and gets paid in dollars. They flew me to the States after I got shot, and all the surgeries were covered by my dad's insurance. It was an arduous process. My parents set me up in an apartment, got me some furniture, and gave me money to live. Eventually, I wanted to go back to Venezuela, take part in the demonstrations, but something strange happened. Because of the hyperinflation of Venezuela, the money they sent amounted to nothing. I stopped watching the YouTube videos, newsfeeds, everything. Every time I heard the sound of a motorcycle I got goosebumps and shivered. And I knew then, I could not go back. So, I filed for political asylum in the U.S. In the meantime, I had to find work. I'd never had a chance to finish my degree in architecture in Venezuela. I noticed when people went to Home Depot, many looked for day workers for all kinds of projects. I stood there, in the parking lot and got work. Sometimes as I arrived at my spot, someone would come by and tell us that we needed to lay low for a few days since ICE had raided some of the home improvement parking lots and more than likely would hit that one in a couple of days.

The current project involves a mix of siding, window repair, and roofing and may take three days. Each day after arriving at the apartment, I shower and ask Alejandra how her day was. I tell her of places she can go when I'm away. We go out to eat at an Indian restaurant. Another night, we try a taqueria with a variety of authentic tacos from different regions of Mexico. But every night when we go to bed, I have all these ideas, we kiss a little, but I'm so exhausted from being on a roof in the Houston sun that I just fall asleep.

Under the scorching sun work becomes mechanical and my mind turns and I keep asking myself what took her so long to respond. If it wasn't for Yolanda giving me her phone number, we may not have crossed paths again. When we go out to eat I ask her, "What happened?"

"I didn't even have a cell phone for a long time. I think I was in shock. I slept on a couch in a basement for six months, having anxiety and panic attacks all the time."

"Was it because of all the demonstrations and violence?"

"No, it was..." She stops, turning red, sneering, looking around the room, then at me. "Yes. All of it."

That's a weird answer. She is holding something in. I can see her pain.

"What happened when your mother had her surgery?"

"Horrible. Very... nasty."

"Nasty?"

"I can't talk about it. Nothing happened! We spent every penny we had and more, my mother almost died. I had to leave after that. I couldn't take it anymore."

We arrive at the apartment, watch TV and then move to the bedroom. We both prop up our laptops and communicate with other friends through social media. I close my laptop and settle under the covers. I hear her laptop close and her breathing close to me. She initiates the touching, playing with the elastic of my boxers, pulling and twisting the hairs on my chest. I play along and run my finger by her panties, get under the elastic without her holding my hand, and pull the fabric down. Her bare skin feels like silk in my hands. Our hands dance up and down, in sync, like we used to during all those afternoons in her bedroom with a TV on and her mother napping in another room. Whispers and giggles and an occasional "shhh, you're going to wake up my mother," filled the air. Now, under the warm covers, with the occasional sound of a car on the highway next to the apartment, she gets on top of me and stares into my eyes, like trying to see inside my soul.

I should have used protection, but I didn't. I had a strange feeling that if I stopped, went to the bathroom to look for it, she would have gotten spooked, like the first day, so I went with the flow.

We spoon for a while. I embrace her tight, then notice tears rolling down my arm. She sobs, holds her breath, then almost imperceptibly sobs again.

I lift my torso from the bed. She sits to the side. What happened to her? I'm about to ask her something when she says, "*Por favor*, don't ask. I already feel so *sucia*, I don't want to feel judged."

"Why don't you move in with me?" I ask Alejandra the next day.

"I could not live with a bunch of guy roommates," she responds. She steers the conversation in a different direction and asks me about work. "Do you like it? Are you making enough money? Do they treat you like an equal?"

"Equal? Hah." I tell her how unintentionally there are so many people that are racist in this country. But... again. I'm lucky. I used to be white until I came here. I have lighter hair, green eyes and even though I speak with an accent, most gringos like me. Many of the contractors I work for are Mexican, dark looking, with pronounced Native American features and whenever they provide some estimate, they don't get the job. Instead, an American contractor, charging thousands more, gets the job and then hires a sub of Mexicans. I see this all the time. Sometimes I'm the front man for a Mexican contractor, so they get the job; other times, I'm the middle man for an American contractor, and translate to the crew in Spanish.

I ask Alejandra what she does. She tells me that she cleans hotel rooms at night in Atlanta. Most convention hotels cannot be occupied until properly cleaned. They do not have enough staff, so they use subcontractors, which then use illegals to do the work. She feels invisible,

working until the sun comes up, sleeping in a basement during the day.

“We could get a place. I can help you get something really good down here,” I insist.

“I don't want to move down here. It's too freaking hot.”

“It's the knee, isn't it? You don't like my limp.”

“It's not that, Antonio. You have more of a swagger than a limp.” She smiles at me. “It would be like moving to Maracaibo and that scorching heat. Atlanta can get hot, but not like this. I get panic attacks, so the last thing I would want on top of that is heat induced asthma.”

“You know. Tomorrow I have to go,” Alejandra says to me before I leave for work.

That's it. The end. The love of my life will be returning to Atlanta. I had hoped to convince her to stay with me, who knows, to even someday get married, but there's this huge wall. Maybe it's the whole experience back in Venezuela, maybe it is that I'm a *cojo*. My limp or swagger is still present, maybe I'm overthinking everything and I just don't understand.

I call her mid-day and ask her if she wants to go to an Italian restaurant and have a goodbye celebration. She sounds enthusiastic and says yes.

When I arrive at the apartment, to my surprise, I notice that she had redone her purple strand of hair along the front. I run my fingers through it. Alejandra looks mesmerizingly beautiful with her long *azabache* black hair. She has taken one of my shirts and — twisting the long sleeves — has turned it into a strapless dress.

In the restaurant she talks about her mother, how hard it was to find insulin down there, or try to buy it online from here in the States, but that Yolanda has helped and that is good.

We go back to the apartment and my room. Our eyes explore each other. She takes off her shoes, unbuttons my shirt, runs her fingers along my chest, lets my pants drop, and lowers my underwear. I want to do something but I go with the flow. She unbuttons her shirt turned-skirt, and removes her panties. I move closer to her. We kiss, while fingers move up and down contemplating undulations, curves, muscle, silky skin, stubble, hair, scars.

“Just hold me tight,” she says.

And I do.

And I feel something intense. Something that does not have words but carries the weight of the world, not only of what has ripped us out of our country and spits us into this one, but has left an unspeakable amount of emotional scar tissue. As I hold her, tears roll down my back, she gasps as she exhales, her heart palpitating with intensity.

Several weeks later I call Yolanda wondering how things are in Venezuela, how Alejandra's mother is doing, do they need anything? I thank her for giving me Alexandra's phone number. And that well, we're going to remain friends.

Yolanda is aware of the trip, feels sorry for the outcome and tells me to bear with her. Alejandra is a very strong person. Something must have happened to her at the hospital when her mother had her surgery. Everything was too fishy. First, the guards took her meds and surgical tools, they asked for an exorbitant amount of money, and when her mother's appendix ruptured, the guards gave her back the medicines like nothing ever happened. She didn't buy it.

“I know those *hijo e putas* and what they're capable of,” Yolanda says.

“Did she tell you?”

“Not with words. But I saw it on her face... it destroyed her.”

“What do you think happened?”

She takes a deep breath as if ready to say something but stops.

I feel immense sadness, but I don't know what to say. In the background the sound of cars and trucks, a honk in the distance, a motorcycle accelerating echoes, the unequivocal hustle and bustle of the streets of Caracas. It fills me with chills and goosebumps, with yearning and dread.

“Just, give her some time. She needs you.”

Appeared in Issue Spring '24